A Guide to Successful Media Interviews

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INTRODUCTION

"Why should I do interviews with the news media and speak to community groups?" you ask. "Isn't that the job of the Public Affairs Officer?" The answer is "Yes" and "No."

Public support and understanding for what we do is vital to our success in fire management. Every agency and state employee plays an important role in helping the public better understand fire management and the work of the professionals in fire prevention and suppression, fire management, and fire use.

Your day-to-day personal interaction with various levels of state and federal agencies is the best and most reliable foundation for good communications. However, many people learn about wildland fire and our work primarily from what they read or hear through the media. How we are portrayed through the news media strongly influences public opinion about the way wildland fire and resources are managed and improved. Each of us can play a role in good media relations, whether it's suggesting an interesting story idea to the Public Affairs Office, responding promptly to a reporter's request for basic information, or agreeing to be interviewed about something in your area of expertise.

This guide is a compilation of information and formatting provided by the Southern California National Forests, NWCG 203 and 403 training course concepts, and subject matter input. Our thanks to those who allow us to avoid "re-creating the wheel."

Even if you do not normally interact with the media, this guide can be used to help you acquaint yourself with media protocols and tips for interviews. Field-based Public Information Officers can also utilize this guide for field interviews and to provide guidance to managers and specialists who do not normally conduct interviews.

The purpose of this guide is to help you develop your skills and confidence, and prepare you to be successful in your interactions with the news media. We hope you find it to be useful. Please let us know where improvements are needed. Call on us at anytime!

NIFC Public/External Affairs

PREPARATION IS KEY

Reporters are trained in interviewing techniques and they work constantly to sharpen their skills. You will feel more confident in your interaction with them if you prepare too.

After you accept an invitation to participate in an interview, you will want to prepare to make an effective presentation. To be successful in a media interview, you and your communications professional must decide on the two or three most important messages or talking points you want to stress. Your talking points should be short and concise, using language that is easily understood.

Having a successful interview encompasses a variety of techniques that are largely a function of attitude. If you assume a strictly passive or reactive mode you give up opportunities to influence the direction of the interview. Always remember that you are in control of the interview. When you are asked to participate in an interview, find out the following:

- ✓ Who will be doing the interview?
- ✓ When will the interview occur?
- ✓ Where will the interview occur?
- ✓ How long will the interview take?
- ✓ What are the subjects to be covered?
- ✓ Will any other people be interviewed on this topic?
- ✓ What is the format of the program or article?

If it's radio or television:

- ✓ Will the interview be live, taped, or edited?
- ✓ Will there be an audience present?
- ✓ Will the audience have an opportunity to ask questions?
- ✓ Will there be call-in questions?

TYPES OF MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Newspaper and broadcast (radio/television) reporters work in vastly different worlds. Understanding the needs of each will give you confidence and make it easier for you to deliver your message effectively and allow you, as a communications professional, to provide value to the interaction.

Print Media: Print media interviews afford the opportunity for more in-depth coverage. Most print journalists will spend considerably more time developing a story than their broadcast counterparts. Use this to your advantage. Ask your communications professional to provide written background information or materials that will substantiate your position and add credibility.

When print media journalists meet you in your office try to arrange your surroundings so you won't be sitting behind a desk or other obstacle. Sit in a chair next to the interviewer, or stand.

Many times reporters from the print media might arrange to talk with you on the telephone. This cuts out a lot of legwork for them. Your Public Affairs Officer should be present either way to monitor the story and assist you with messages. Remember that they are writing or typing your responses, so even though you can't see them you must communicate more slowly.

Radio: Most radio reporters will telephone you for a taped interview since they are generally very lightly staffed. They will want short concise answers called sound bites that should last no longer than 20 seconds. Practice your responses with your watch to get a feel for what you can say in 20 seconds. They may ask you specific questions or they may say something open-ended like "Tell us about this fire season." Either way, you'll need to be succinct and to the point.

Television: There are several formats for TV interviews.

Edited Interview: This is the bread and butter of the TV industry. Expect that even an hour of interview time will be condensed to a 15 to 30 second piece on the air. That's why it is so important to have your key messages in mind and get your primary message out in your first sentence. Make sure your answers can stand alone. If the reporter has to piece together answers, he/she might not use the information the way you meant to present it.

Don't try to fill dead air (silence). After you answer the question, stop. If you're satisfied with your answer, don't change it. If you are asked the same question again, answer it the way you think it should be answered.

Your public affairs specialist will suggest a setting or backdrop for the interview to provide visual enhancement.

Remote Interview: Sometimes you're asked to answer questions from a correspondent at a distant in-studio location. This is a situation where you look into the lens of the camera as if you were talking to the reporter at the other end. You'll wear an earpiece so that you can hear the producer and the reporter in the studio. Listen to the instructions and make sure you can hear clearly. Concentrate on their questions and your answers. For national media, there may a three-second time delay between when you see their lips moving on the screen and when you hear the words in your ear. Do not anticipate the question – be patient and wait for the audio to come through.

Hostile Interview: This kind of interview occurs rarely, and you will be briefed by your communications professional if there is no other way to meet the reporter's needs. Preparation is the key to an effective interview in this situation. Know the tough issues likely to be raised and most of all, know the points you want to get across. Be firm but pleasant, keep your cool, hold your ground, correct inaccuracies.

Hijacked Interview: As with hostile interviews, this happens rarely. If a reporter indicates they want an interview on one subject, and suddenly switches to some other, usually controversial, issue you or your communications professional can end the interview immediately. Indicate that you understood the interview to be on another topic, and would be glad to reschedule after you've had time to prepare. You may answer the question if you choose, but then all questions are fair game for the reporter.

News Conference: There will be times when a news conference is the most efficient way to reach the maximum number of reporters from all types of media. A news conference takes good organization and preparation by your communications professional. You, as the selected spokesperson, may either stand behind a podium or be seated at a table. Media representatives may place a multitude of cameras, microphones and recording devices in front of you. You may be asked to deliver a written statement then receive questions. Deliver your message as if you were addressing a small gathering of ordinary people. While answering questions, look directly at the reporter asking the question. Try to establish eye contact.

Talk Show: This is generally a less formal "lighter" environment, but you must still stay on message and maintain your professional appearance. The interviewer will generally be friendly, inquisitive and may be unfamiliar with the topic or what you do. A wide range of subjects may be covered. The host's unfamiliarity with your subject allows you to exercise greater control. Use simple English. Avoid technical language or jargon. Use personal stories and analogies that paint a picture. Use the interviewer's question as a springboard to get your points across.

YOUR PRESENTATION

Projecting confidence will help you to be perceived as a knowledgeable credible spokesperson. Here are some tips:

- Try to relax.
- Be confident that you are the subject matter expert.
- Avoid technical terms and acronyms.
- Keep your answers simple and concise. Imagine you are talking to a junior high school class.
- If you don't know the answer to the reporter's question, say so. Then promise to follow up and find the answer for them. Then keep your promise.
- Never ever say: "No comment." That response immediately raises red flags and calls your honesty and credibility into question. If you can't comment, say why, i.e., it's under investigation, or it's premature to say, or it would be more appropriately answered at another level of the agency, etc.
- In some situations, where the question seems to be way off base or heading down the wrong path, it's effective to re-phrase the question, i.e., "I think what you're asking is…"
- Use the methods of bridging, hooking or flagging. *Bridging* is building a bridge from the question to a point you want to make. EXAMPLE: When asked how much money the fire program will get, the interviewee bridges and says, "Budget is always important to any program, but what is the most important item in fire right now is the National Fire Plan." *Hooking* is leading the interview by answering a question. EXAMPLE: "I think that's an important question, but what your viewers really might want to know is…" *Flagging* is throwing up a red flag in the interview by starting a sentence with "This is a very important point…"
- Try not to introduce too much information; it can cause confusion and result in an inaccurate or out of context statement. (Remember your key messages!).
- If the reporter's question contains misinformation, address or correct the inaccuracies in the information before you respond.
- If you make a mistake while answering, say so and restate your answer.
- Follow 'yes' or 'no' answers with an explanation.
- There are no dumb questions. Treat all questions seriously.
- Never speak OFF THE RECORD. Regardless of how friendly you might be with a reporter, you should expect that anything you say could someday appear in print.
- Never assume the camera is off.
- Always tell the truth.
- Don't be defensive.
- Never ask to edit a reporter's written or taped story. You may ask to have a copy sent to you as a courtesy before it is printed.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Although much of the following information pertains to television interviews, the basic principles are common to any communications environment. For better or worse, what is said is not always as important as the manner in which it is said. Impressions may outweigh substance. Here are some tips for improving your non-verbal communication:

- Maintain a pleasant attentive countenance. On camera, smile only when it is appropriate. Match your facial expression to the seriousness of the issue.
- Concentrate on the interviewer. Maintain eye contact with him/her. Don't look at the camera.
- Keep your head up. If you're sitting, sit up straight. Don't slouch or lean to one side.
- When standing, keep still. Don't sway or bounce on the balls of your feet. Any movement is exaggerated on camera. Let your hands drop naturally to your sides and use natural hand movements for emphasis. Avoid choppy motions with your hands. Keep your hands and arms below your shoulders and away from your face.

- Do not look at or lean into the microphone. The reporter will hold it at the appropriate distance. Don't touch the microphone.
- Avoid nodding your head unnecessarily. It may erroneously signal agreement with what was said.

YOUR APPEARANCE

- If you are in uniform, be sure it's clean and ironed.
- If you do not wear a uniform, dress appropriately.
- Formal in-studio interviews present their own set of rules (conservative dress, decent shoes, socks high enough to hide your bare skin!)
- Do not wear sunglasses or glasses that darken automatically.
- Don't wear a hat or anything with a commercial logo on it!
- Your communications professional will check your appearance after you do. Hair combed? No food on your face?

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- Thank the reporter for the interview. A positive follow-through might be the most important effort you make!
- The reporter may need more information to complete the story. Be sure to provide any necessary clarification right then and there or as soon as possible so that your communications professional can follow through.
- Clarify or elaborate on points you felt were unclear or may have been misinterpreted.
- Once you have given permission for the interview, you have relinquished the right to control what is written or aired. You may, however, offer to assist the reporter in checking the accuracy if the story is highly technical or complex.
- If a correspondent makes a mistake or uses something out of context, you may call the reporter or news director to point out the error, but only if it is very significant. Don't expect a retraction, but know that you're helping to clarify the story to avoid similar future error.

PRACTICE TIPS

- ✓ Choose a person who is serious about helping you, one who will do his or her best in playing the interviewer's role. Your communications professional can assist you.

- ✓ Supply the practice interviewer with your list of anticipated questions. Have the interviewer mix up the list and rephrase the questions in their own style. Instruct the interviewer to press you on those questions and go off on tangents.

- ✓ Fully answer each question, but try to redirect the interview back to your agenda of prioritized message points.

- ✓ Set a firm time limit that closely approximates what you expect to be given on the program.

- ✓ Practice with as many interviewers as possible.

- ✓ If you can, videotape or audiotape each interview so that you can critique your answers. Pay particular attention to how you made your main points regardless of the questions.

- ✓ If you make a mistake, start over.

- ✓ Work to shorten your answers. In a broadcast interview that you know will be edited, a short comment that clearly makes a point is apt to be used.

- ✓ Make sure you listen to the questions and don't talk over the interviewer. If you talk over the question, your answer can not be used.

STAYING ON MESSAGE

1. Be concise and say the most important thing first.

2. Stick to your main points, even if it means repeating yourself.

3. Know when to be quiet. Dead air is the reporter's problem.

4. Don't speculate. If you don't know the answer, say so, and offer to find someone who does. In a live interview, bridge back to your main points.

5. Remember that you represent your agency. Don't give your personal opinion.

6. Don't speak for anyone else. Let other agencies and other people speak for themselves.

7. Clarify incorrect statements,

8. Avoid yes/no answers. Use the opportunity to bridge back to your main points.

9. Keep your cool.

10. Jump in with your message when asked "Do you have anything else you would like to say?"

Always remember that your objective is to give the reporter a story based on what <u>you</u> want to say.

FIVE EASY STEPS

Listen carefully to the reporter's questions and give appropriate answers. Sometimes, we tend to give the same answer over and over, whether it has anything to do with the question or not. The trick is to answer the questions and then smoothly work in your main message. This five step approach helps you to do that:

1. Wait until the complete question is asked.

2. Answer the question directly.

3. Bridge to your main message.

4. Present your main message.

5. Be prepared to back up your statements with facts or another message.

You may need to follow these steps several times during the same interview to stay on message.

TECHNIQUES FOR HANDLING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

1. The Loaded Question
   Identify the false assumption, and then answer the question. *"Our job is to manage public lands according to the law, balancing public use and resource protection. We are not in the business of violating anyone's rights."*

2. Unacceptable Alternatives
   Just say the alternatives are not acceptable. *"That's not a practical solution. Bark beetles are present throughout the forest, and we'd have to spray every inch to eliminate them."*

3. Hypothetical Situations
   Don't answer a hypothetical question. *"That's a hypothetical question and it's not appropriate for me to answer it" or "Any answer to that would be pure speculation and not valid."*

4. Commenting on Comments
   This is simple. Just say, *"I am unfamiliar with that statement and am not prepared to respond." Or, "You'll need to check that out with him (the commenter)."*

5. Divide and Conquer
   Acknowledge the obvious, then bridge to your main message. *"I'm clearly not the Incident Commander, but I know everyone is working very hard to reach their objectives in the safest and least costly way possible……"*

6. False Premises
   Counter immediately, and then get to your main message. *"Winds were light at the burn site and predicted to remain that way when the agency began the burning project. The fire managers continued to take weather readings throughout the day, and immediately implemented the contingency plan when weather readings showed changing conditions."*

7. Entrapment
   Don't answer by repeating the negative. *"You're right; there are a lot of people who don't like the pass."* Immediately, you're on the defensive and you'll lose the interview. Instead start with something positive. *"Independent surveys show that visitors support the Adventure Pass program by a 3:1 margin, with even greater support in those areas most heavily impacted by recreation use."*

8. Machine Gunning
   After a series of rapid fire questions, select the question you want to answer, and then answer it. When you stop, the reporter will likely pick one of those questions previously asked as a follow-up.

9. Interruptions
   Just say, *"Let me finish answering the last question."* Then answer the question again starting at the beginning.

10. Silence May Not Be Golden
    Rather than ramble, simply ask, *"Any more questions?" or, "Will that do?"*

11. Ambush (very rare at NIFC)
    Answer questions if you can. If you can't, explain why. Invite the reporter in, and it will give you a few minutes to think things through. A poor, flustered answer is worse than politely saying you're not prepared to answer the question right now.

12. The Heckler
    Try to answer with short responses and try to give upbeat answers. Don't fall into the trap of belittling the topic, as the reporter is doing.

Glossary of News Media Terms

Assignment Editor	The newspaper or television staff member who decides what stories will be covered and assigns them to reporters.
Beat	A reporter's regular assignment, such as the police beat or fire beat. Reporters check with sources occasionally to see if there are any potential stories.
Breaking News	Unplanned, spontaneous news events, such as wildfires, as opposed to scheduled events like City Council meetings.
Deadline	The time at which a story must be ready or after which material will no longer be accepted for publication or broadcast.
Boom Mic	Large microphone on a stick used to record sound part of interview.
Feature	A story providing an in-depth look at news other than hard or breaking news, or a lighter look at the news.
Five W's and H	Who, what, where, when, why and how—the major questions answered in a news story.
Follow-Up	A story that adds information to a story previously broadcast or published.
Hard News	The serious and immediate news of the day as opposed to feature stories and stories that can wait.
Lavalier Mic	Small, self-contained microphone that attaches to a lapel or the front of a shirt; reporters often want to attach a battery pack to the interviewees waist and run the wire inside their shirt so as not to be seen.
Live Feed	Going on air live from a remote location, often during breaking news.
Market Sweeps	The ratings period for television during which advertising prices are determined (based on viewership); typically occurs during the months of April and November.
"Nat" Sound	Natural background sounds (engine roaring, stream gurgling, fire crackling) that help tell the story during a radio or television report; especially popular in NPR radio broadcasts.
News Assignment Editor	Assists the news director in scheduling the day's story schedule, making assignments to reporters and coordinating news items.
News Director	The manager in charge of a radio or television news department. Responsible for the items included in news programs. Prioritizes news items and coordinates news assignments.
Off-The-Record	Information provided to a reporter that is meant for background and not for publication. It is a good policy to never assume anything is off the record. If you say it, expect to hear it on the air or see it in print.
Package	A television story where the reporter's voice is recorded over the videotape.
Photog	Slang for photographer or videographer.
Producer	In television news, the person who puts together the newscast and decides where a story will be placed.
Program Director	Responsible for all taped and live radio and television productions other than the news (such as public affairs programs and station specials).

Glossary of News Media Terms, continued...

Public File	Available (by law) for free public viewing at any radio or television station; documents all educational / public service programming and activities for the community.
Public Service Director	Manages the station's public service programming, which provides airtime to cover community issues and provides a channel of information for local non-profit organizations.
Publisher	The individual who has overall responsibility for the publication, like a chief executive officer.
Reporter	Responsible for getting the facts of the story – news or feature – and writing it.
Roll Tape	Phrase used to indicate that recording has begun.
Satellite Truck	Vehicle used to uplink with television station for the purpose of broadcasting a report from a remote location; can also be used for editing packages.
Segment	A story appearing as part of a bigger news telecast.
Sidebar	A story on the same topic that runs the same day and right next to the main story. The sidebar may have a narrower focus or more detail on a single aspect of the main story.
Sound bite	The broadcast version of a quote. Usually consists of a very short message or statement.
Stand-up	A reporter telling a small part of the story on camera in the field as part of a package.
Station or General Manager (GM)	Responsible for the overall operations of the TV or radio station.
Stringer	A freelance videographer or reporter who shoots stories to sell them to a television station or wire service.
Talent	Slang for reporter or news anchor; the on-air personality.
Talking Head	A videotape recording of a close-up shot of someone talking.
Voice-over	A television story where the reporter reads a script over videotape.
Wallpaper	People, often uniformed employees or cooperators, lined up behind a speaker to show support at a news conference, for example; a visual representation of all the agencies involved.
Wire Services	Companies such as Associated Press (AP) or Reuters which provide stock news stories and photos to local and national media.
Wire Story	A news story that appears on a wire service.
Wraparound	A radio story where the reporter's voice is recorded on audiotape around a sound bite. Similar to television news "package".
409 Statute	California law allowing news media access to areas otherwise closed to the public during wildland fires, floods, earthquakes, etc.

COMMONLY MISUSED WORDS OR PHRASES

Misuse	Explanation
Irregardless	Nonstandard English - avoid using. It's "irrespective" or "regardless".
Very Unique	Unique means one of a kind. It either is or isn't. No qualifier is necessary.
Completely Destroyed	Destroyed is another absolute. It either is or it isn't.
A myriad of…	Myriad stands alone, Should be "myriad..." (You fill in the blank - i.e. She has myriad responsibilities.)
The media is…	"Media" is a plural. Should be "the media are…" You fill in the blank.
Close proximity	Proximity means close.
General consensus	Consensus stands alone.
Point in time	Points are in space. Moments are in time.
I feel badly	That means to do a bad job of feeling. Should be "I feel bad."
Lost (i.e. houses lost)	Use "burned." We're not looking for "lost" houses.

OTHER FREQUENTLY ABUSED WORDS

Word	Definition
Dilemma	Not just a problem, it is a choice between two equally balanced alternatives.
Acronym	Is a word, not just a set of initials. For example, NASA is an acronym, CDF is not.
Literally	Means actually. To say a person literally exploded with enthusiasm is probably not accurate (we hope).
Basically	Is one of our most overused words. It means pertaining to forming a base, a fundamental. To say, "Basically, we went home after the game," is not the correct usage of the word.
Imply/Infer	These two are often interchanged. The speaker implies a message and the listener infers meaning from it.
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Glossary of Social Media Terms

Blogs or weblogs	A Web site, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse chronological order. “Blog” is also a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.
Micro-blogging	Brief posts to a personal blog on a micro-blogging Web site, such as Twitter. Microposts can be made public on a Web site and/or distributed to a private group of subscribers. Subscribers can read micro-blog posts online or request that updates be delivered in real time to their desktop as an instant message or sent to a mobile device as an SMS text message.
RSS feed	Short for Really Simple Syndication. A family of Web feed formats used to publish frequently updated content such as blog entries, news headlines, and podcasts in a standardized format. An RSS document (called a “feed”, “Web feed,” or “channel”) contains either a summary of content from an associated Web site or the full text. RSS makes it possible for people to keep up with Web sites in an automated manner.
Search engine optimization (SEO)	SEO is the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic to a Web site from search engines via “natural” (“organic” or “algorithmic”) search results. Usually, the earlier a site is presented in the search results, or the higher it “ranks,” the more searchers will visit that site. SEO can also target different kinds of search, including image search, local search, and industry-specific vertical search engines.
SMS	Short message service or SMS is a communications protocol allowing the interchange of short text messages between mobile telephone devices. SMS text messaging is the most widely used data application on the planet. Social media – Term for the tools and platforms people use to publish, converse and share content online. The tools include blogs, wikis, podcasts, and sites to share photos and bookmarks.
Social networking sites	Online places where users can create a profile for themselves, and then socialize with others using a range of social media tools including blogs, video, images, tagging, lists of friends, forums, and messaging.
Twitter	A social networking and micro-blogging service that allows its users to send and read other users’ updates (otherwise known as tweets), which are text-based posts of up to 140 characters in length.
Web 2.0	Term to describe blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and other Internet-based services that emphasize collaboration and sharing, rather than less interactive publishing (Web 1.0). It is associated with the idea of the Internet as a platform.
Wiki	Web site that allows users to add and update content on the site using their own Web browser.

Notes

Notes

Notes

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